

“The Possession of Knowledge Carries an Ethical Responsibility.” Evaluate this claim.

This ambiguous title assumes that the possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility i.e. that simply knowing something makes you ethically responsible. Ethical responsibility refers to the idea that you should do something to correct a harmful situation or prevent harm from happening. The quote has a direct assumption that knowledge carries an ethical responsibility. Having knowledge produces an understanding of consequences which carries the weight of responsibility. The knowledge issue question that arises from this assumption is how, if at all, can we determine if knowing something should lead to an ethical responsibility? We can attempt to answer this question by agreeing that possessing knowledge does at times perhaps carry an ethical responsibility using reason, emotion and sense perception as the Ways of Knowing as well as History, and Natural Science as the Areas of Knowledge.

Exploring History as well as the Natural science of biology can be used to support how having knowledge, specifically the knowledge that pertains to eugenics, carries an ethical responsibility. The word eugenics originated in the late 1800's by Francis Galton whose ultimate goal was to improve human 'stock' by ridding it of undesirable traits and increasing the desirable ones through selective breeding.¹ Being in agreement that possession does carry an ethical responsibility; Galton is somewhat responsible for the recurring deaths which eugenics has caused over time. As centuries went by, eugenics evolved into not just increasing the birth-rate of the 'fit' by selected parenthood ('positive eugenics'), but also reducing the birth-rate of those people thought to impair such improvement, the 'unfit' ('negative eugenics'). For example, by 1913, one-third of the US States had laws allowing for the compulsory sterilization of those held in custody who were deemed to be 'unfit'. This resulted in the forced sterilization of around 70,000 victims, including criminals, the mentally retarded, drug addicts, paupers, the blind, the deaf, and people with epilepsy, TB or syphilis. From this scenario a question arises; “does the use of eugenics hold an ethical responsibility towards the fata outcome, and if so, who is responsible?”

In my opinion the use and gain of the knowledge in eugenics was a great moral and ethical failure and all individuals applying its knowledge held an ethical responsibility with it. It is a universal assumption that moral and ethical humans would ensure that the rules and efforts of any legal movements would support all individuals - not just the 'fit' individuals. Eugenics did the exact opposite, removing competition from 'unfit' humans therefore failing the moral obligation to protect helpless individuals from harm. The deontologist theory (Kant's theory) states that certain types of acts are intrinsically right or wrong, i.e. right or wrong in themselves, irrespective of their consequences. Additionally, there is a universal law to this theory which states that one's actions are based only on maxims that would be accepted as

¹ <http://creation.com/eugenics-death-of-the-defenceless>

universal law and that the principle behind any action should be applicable in any situation. Thus, in this case the use of eugenics to improve the future generations of the human race, regardless the outcome was ethically wrong as the conscious decision to violate the rights of other individuals is universally established to be immoral.

Nevertheless the deontologist theory can be contradicted using the utilitarianism theory, although still supporting the claim that the possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility. This opposing view, by contrast, argues that ethical value lies in their consequences, not in our actions (even if they may be immoral). It states that we should always aim at ensuring the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Earlier in this century, the eugenics movement was more concerned with the genetic quality or "health" of populations. In 1990, four-year old Ashanthi DeSilva, a child with SCIDS (Severe Combined Immune Deficiency Syndrome), became the first patient to be successfully treated using gene therapy from the idea of eugenics as part of a clinical trial at the National Institutes of Health.² The development of genetic engineering from the idea of eugenics will allow scientists to create cures for diseases that are not curable today. Genetic engineering is used in the fight against problems such as cystic fibrosis, the "bubble boy" disease, diabetes, and several more. This in turn will and has affected society in a positive way.³ Therefore the actions concerning eugenics were, in this sense, ethically correct.

The possession of knowledge carries with it ethical obligations to society in certain significant circumstances on a large scale. This allows for the interpretation of the claim to be that knowledge is powerful and "with great power comes great responsibility".⁴ A good example of this is assessing the role of a psychiatrist under the area of knowledge of the human sciences. Psychiatrists are obligated to keep the personal details of each client confidential no matter what they may consist of, as well as to prevent patients from causing harm to themselves or others. In this case, clients believe they can confide in the psychiatrist and reveal any assumed or known reasons as to why they suffer from a mental illness, even if it as extreme as a committed crime such as murder. While it is a hypothetical situation, wouldn't having knowledge of someone who committed a murder carry an ethical responsibility to turn the murderer in? How can you be sure he won't kill again, having already done it once? Emotion, a way of knowing, may lead the psychiatrist to sympathise with the client and therefore prevent the client to suffer from more harm than they already are from their mental illness, by remaining silent. Although this action prevents harm from happening to someone, it is still

² <http://scienceinsociety.northwestern.edu/content/articles/2009/research-digest/eugenics/modern-eugenics-building-a-better-person>

³ <http://www.disabled-world.com/artman/publish/genetic-engineering.shtml>

⁴ Voltaire. Jean, Adrien. Beuchot, Quentin and Miger, Pierre, Auguste. "Œuvres de Voltaire, Volume 48". Lefèvre, 1832

ethically incorrect. According to the utilitarianism theory, we should always aim at ensuring the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people and this situation may have benefited one person but may cause harm to others if the client wishes to continue to commit heinous crimes. Furthermore, counter to governmental law, the psychiatrist will be partially responsible if the client were to commit another murder he/she chooses to remain silent because reason, another way of knowing, tells us that the psychiatrist could have taken preventative action by notifying authorities. Hence, I justly believe that an individual can be held ethically responsible for simply possessing knowledge.

It is significant to examine the claim from different perspectives and to consider possible counterclaims. In my opinion the most significant counterclaim is not necessarily the possession of knowledge that carries an ethical responsibility, but it's what the knower does with knowledge that carries an ethical responsibility.

Through personal experience and the area of knowledge of the arts, I'm highly aware that how you utilize knowledge you've obtained has an ethical responsibility. Over the past couple of years of my life I have had the privilege of learning the techniques, forms and ideology of karate, giving me the ability to finally achieve a brown-belt. I have always been told that that, "Karate is more than just about beating someone up." It is first and foremost about becoming a better human being and applying its teachings of self-defense only in severe circumstances; making sure to firstly be able to emphasize humility and respect. Thus, there's an underlying ethical responsibility that comes with the usage of such powerful knowledge, because not everyone has the opportunity to know and use Karate. Being disparaged by a girl in my first year of secondary school is when I first became aware of this ethical duty. As the malicious acts recurred I decided to stand up for myself which led to the girl being left with a bruised knee. I was unethical in the actions I took from the perspective of a martial artist because I was not physically threatened and did not remain disciplined or patient. My own sense perception justified the immorality of my actions as I knew that hurting the girl was unnecessary. My ethical duty lay in applying my knowledge in Karate only in severe circumstances, not for unnecessary and vengeful purposes to cause harm to others and therefore neglecting my responsibility. Just because you know how to fight doesn't give you the right to injure someone. In this case, I did not hold an ethical responsibility of simply possessing the knowledge of how to perform Karate but by using it and applying it to unnecessary situations; therefore supporting the counterclaim.

In conclusion, the possession of knowledge does indeed carry an ethical responsibility, in certain situations, because there are certain kinds of knowledge that impose an obligation or a challenge on the person who carries that knowledge as seen through the examples of the different areas of knowledge. Furthermore, the counterclaim justifies the fact that the way one

chooses to act based on their possession of knowledge, undoubtedly carries an ethical responsibility as well. Individuals are forced to face the difficulties of balancing their moral values and senses of what is right or wrong in order to decide on how they may use knowledge gained. Anyone with the possession of knowledge is forced to assess the potential consequences of their actions. My overall outlook on the referenced claim is that if you possess the knowledge to determine right from wrong from other types of knowledge gained, you have the responsibility to make ethical decisions.